A Man Despised By the Chattering Class

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An equestrian statue stands high on Connecticut Avenue, facing south toward the White House, which the man on horseback coveted, and beyond toward the Potomac, which, had he not been unhorsed by the president he despised, might today be an international boundary. With Eastern Europeans putting away stupid statues of disagreeable people, let us celebrate Lincoln's birthday by banishing this statue of his tormentor: Gen. George B. McClellan.

It celebrates someone whose vainglory, political ambition and military incompetence put the Republic at risk. His contempt for Lincoln ("baboon," "gorilla") manifested itself repeatedly in insufferable rudeness, such as refusing to receive Lincoln's visits to his home. To which rudeness Lincoln responded by saying he would hold McClellan's horse if he would just fight and win.

His one great victory, Antietam, was characteristically incomplete and partly the result of a fluke (copies of Lee's orders were found in a Maryland field, wrapped around three cigars). It precipitated something McClellan opposed, the Emancipation Proclamation. He was a great organizer, but was forever organizing, citing exaggerated estimates of Confederate strength to justify delays. "All quiet along the Potomac" was a great song but lousy strategy. It sowed a sense of inferiority in Union forces.

He was a paranoiac with real enemies, whom he called "traitors."

Lincoln sacked him, then he lost to Lincoln in the 1864 election. Forty-three years later, for no conceivable good reason, a statue was erected that has cluttered the city long enough.

Just kidding. Constantly rearranging the public furniture, shuffling public symbols in and out of favor, is a disagreeable European habit, a reflection of ideological fads and political immaturity. In America, surely, we know better than to be so foolish. We should not, for example, send to society's attic the bust of John Foster Dulles that today adorns the airport that—for now—bears his name.

Talk about an untimely idea: victory in the Cold War is coinciding with a proposal to repeal an honor accorded to a man who insisted there was no substitute for victory. Until Thursday, Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole of Kansas was the heavy hitter among those urging that Washington's Dulles Airport be renamed for Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was born in Texas 100 years ago this year but who spent his formative years in Kansas. Dole has now sounded retreat. Not a moment too soon. John Foster Dulles' grandfather was President Benjamin Harrison's secretary of state. His uncle was Robert Lansing, Woodrow Wilson's secretary of state. If Taft rather than Eisenhower had won the presidency in 1952, Dulles still would have become secretary of state.

He had prepared all his life for that office. He had served Roosevelt and Truman, had helped lift a reluctant Republican Party up from isolationism by supporting the Marshall Plan and NATO, had insisted that the word "justice" be as prominent as "peace" in the U.N. Charter.

His preeminence was particularly impressive because it owed nothing to his personality. Stephen Ambrose, Eisenhower's biographer, says that aside from Eisenhower almost everyone found Dulles unbearably pompous and dull—"dull, duller, Dulles," was the jape. Churchill deliberately lisped Dulles' name and when told that Allen Dulles was to head the CIA he said, "They tell me that there is another Dullith. Is that possible?"

But Dulles's starchy personality was suited to implementation of the policies that came from the carefully amiable, always guileful man for whom he worked. "The truth," wrote Ambrose, "was that Eisenhower, not Dulles, made the policy, as anyone who knew anything about the inner workings of the Eisenhower administration realized." Eisenhower shrewdly used Dulles as a lightning rod to draw away the hostility that vigorous prosecution of the Cold War generated among much of the intelligentsia.

Dulles, like Eisenhower, only more so, was despised by much of the chattering class. Dulles's sin was his "moralistic" vision of the Cold War and of the evil empire responsible for it. But Eisenhower fully shared Dulles's belief that no real peace would be possible until the Soviet system changed internally.

One reason the 1980s ended so well for the West is that they began with the election of a president who joined the Republican Party when Dulles was helping set the tone of it. Ronald Reagan re-moralized the Cold War after the demoralization called détente—which coincided in the 1970s with unprecedented Soviet aggressiveness. Re-moralizing the Cold War was necessary for re-summoning the stamina for winning it.

America was never more American than in the 1950s, when America was at the wheel of the world and was sure it was right, and was. By all means rename something for Eisenhower, the man who embodied the '50s. Rename something as big as he was, something as broad as his inspiriting grin that contrasted so with Dulles' grimness. Rename Kansas. Call it with Midwestern informality: Ike.

But leave Dulles in peace and in his place of honor.

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